The Idea of the Church.

J. Panton Ham.

THE

IDEA OF THE CHURCH:

An Essay.

BY

J. PANTON HAM.

"The House of God, which is the Church of the Living God."
1 Tim. iii. 15.

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THE COMMONWEALTH OF RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT.

Of all the facts and phenomena presented in the social life of a civilized people, the fact of the Church is among the most observable and interesting. When I say, the Church, I do not refer to any particular ecclesiastical organization, the members of which may think proper to appropriate to their own particular communion this definite and exclusive distinction, but rather to that general manifestation of the aggregate religious consciousness of a people, irrespective of the various phases of faith and ecclesiastical preferences which diversify the wide area of the common Christian life. By the term Church, I understand that general religious sentiment in a Christian society which takes some outward form for the purpose of expressing its special convictions and aspirations, to find a home for the indulgence of its purest sympathies, and a school for its highest and most essential cul-

ture. The variety which this active sentiment will necessarily give birth to under the influences of personal conscientiousness, taste, education and social relationships, grouped together regardless of their sectional differences, enters into and constitutes the idea of the Church. Such seems to have been the apostolic idea of the Christian Church expressed by St. Paul in the words, "There is one body, and one spirit, even as ye are called in one hope of your calling." His favourite metaphor of many members in one body having their relative functions and positions of rank, but all united by one spirit or bond of common sympathy, exhibits the Church as a Commonwealth of religious sentiment and life, marked by great variety in its development and mode of operation. "There are diversities of gifts," he says again, "but the same spirit. And there are differences of administrations or ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of operations, but it is the same God who worketh all in all."

It is therefore in this broad catholic, not in any narrow ecclesiastical sense, that I use the word Church, and propose to consider its rise, development, characteristic functions, and educational position in society.

SOCIETY AND THE RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT.

If religion is not a superstition, something which artificially stands out, and is as artificially imposed upon our social life, but a natural sentiment rudimentally born within us, every civilized community will recognize and respect its activity and development. The Church, whatever may be its ecclesiastical form and doctrinal thought, will always be contemplated as the growth of this sentiment, and, for this reason, will always claim from every intelligent and well-constituted mind a sympathetic and respectful regard. A general respect of this kind cannot be withheld without betraying either a narrow and prejudiced understanding, or the absence of a proper degree of religious feeling and sympathy. The accidents of religious life—by which I mean the speculative sentiments and ecclesiastical predilections which distinguish any particular form of religious society—are subordinate and postponed considerations when we are speaking of the respect due to the existence and activity of the religious sentiment. We do but yield to a dictate of our common nature when we do personal homage to this sentiment. So natural is this sentiment, that a man cannot suffer it to be weakened within himself without being conscious of a void which he is

utterly unable long to support. It is God's own witness in the soul against the unnatural lie which, by a kind of intellectual aberration and a sort of moral violence exerted upon his own nature, leads a man to deny the Supreme existence. It is the best of all securities and the most convincing of all arguments against the unnatural and suicidal position of atheism.

THE CHURCH THE BIRTH OF THE RELIGIOUS SENTIMENT.

It is then out of this natural sentiment of religion that the Church arises, in which it has its reason and justification, and on which it stands immovably fixed as on a rock. The tree or any other object of nature is no more a product of a natural force or law than is the Church in the spiritual and social life of a people. Its form and degree of development are moulded by and proportioned to the civilization of a community, as the development of vegetable life is the result of progress in the natural history of the physical world, the gradual preparation of the earth's surface, the advancement of knowledge and the arts of cultivation. If in some conditions of human society the religious sentiment may be shown to be so feeble

as to scarcely betray any signs of vitality, this fact may find its analogy in the natural history of the earth and its products, in which there has been a period of the simplest forms of rudimentary life and even of chaos itself; and, yet again, in the return of parts of the once habitable world, through social degeneration or political catastrophe, to comparative or absolute sterility. The Church in its vital character and essential elements is not an artificial product of civilization. Let us carefully separate its accidents from its essence, and while we admit the influence of civilization in its forms, and modes of thought, and organization, we shall recognize the Church in its characteristic spirit and aims as a normal and necessary condition of human life. It has its own distinct peculiarities and separate existence as a virtual society within the larger social circle of the community; but this, so far from being a proof of its essentially artificial and forced growth, may rather be regarded as the expression of a higher moral aspiration, and as the testimony of the human conscience to the necessity of a more perfect social life than that enforced by the mutual claims and conveniences of ordinary society. "Of what consequence is it that the Church is a private society, if, like a well-regulated family on a larger scale, she shed abroad her influence, and rule within with greater power than the

State rules without? 'In general society,' says a celebrated publicist,* 'particular societies may be formed. Individuals may unite together whenever, by so doing, they think they shall be better able to accomplish a legitimate object. Thus the love of music may give birth to a particular society. Much more if religious ideas have been formed by some individuals—if they esteem it a duty, conformably with these ideas, to undertake certain actions—if they think that these objects ought to be accomplished in common, they will form among themselves a *religious society* (a church). The great community ought not only to suffer this to be formed, it ought to protect it; but it does not acquaint itself with the ideas and the acts of each incorporated society, except to ascertain that they contain nothing contrary to the general conventions which exist between citizens as citizens.'"† These observations are very suggestive, because they not only justify the existence of the private society or church, but at the same time affirm that a true toleration excludes any interference by the general community, through its organ the State, with the internal government of this private society, either by exercising any political control, or by the special patronage of any particular section of it.

* Schlœzer.

† Vinet: The Profession of Personal Religious Conviction, Appendix, p. 409.

SCHISM.

If the Church is correctly defined as the aggregate religious sentiment of mankind developing itself in practical conformity with its highest conceptions of duty both towards God and man, then the unity of the Church is a spiritual and moral oneness pervading the whole invisible realm of religious consciousness and life, and acknowledged by all who are individually comprised within it. This unity is primarily and directly with God as the centre of religious attraction, and, as a necessary consequence, between all the individual members of the invisible Church as the sympathetic and converging lines towards this divine centre. The rupture of this unity by the loss of spiritual sympathy and opposition to its spirit and aims is Schism, which is not an ecclesiastical sin as conventionally understood—a sin, that is, against some form of ecclesiastical organization through conscientious separation from its discipline and order of worship, which is no sin at all, but the rightful exercise of individual liberty in a matter of personal conviction, taste and polity; it is a sin of the most aggravated and deplorable nature, since it voluntarily cuts off the soul from God, and places it out of its proper relations with all that is true, pure

and good in human life. The universal and ruling order of things in the sphere of morals and religion has established a sentiment of spiritual unity between the Moral Governor of the world and His intelligent creatures as the condition of the harmony and well-being of the moral creation. This unity every soul is constituted to enter into, and is required to preserve, in the interest and for the integrity and efficient influence of religion. Schism, as a voluntary act of separation from this unity, violates the moral principles of the universe, disturbs and places itself in antagonism with the divine authority and constitution of things, and is therefore not only *a* sin, one sin among others, but emphatically *the* sin, sin in its most radical and comprehensive nature. The sin of Schism is not to be spoken of in comparison with other sins; it is itself the fundamental idea, the essence and primary root of all evil. Because we deny that it has any existence or meaning in relation to any theory or practice of Ecclesiastical or Church government,—that secession from any form of Ecclesiastical Polity is a separation not to be denounced as schismatical,—we do not therefore close our eyes to the criminality of Schism, nor mitigate in the least its high religious offence. We say it is a sin against God and the divine ideal of human nature, —that it aims to obstruct the development of the

normal condition of human life,—that it is a spontaneous act of moral suicide. This is its offence, its criminality. It is a sin against God, in refusing communion with Him, the Supreme Truth and Love, and against human nature, in resisting the claims of a true and permanent fellowship, and therefore against the Church, whose idea is the supremacy and love of God, and the spiritual unity, mutual service, and common well-being and perfection of all mankind. Our idea of the Church as a spiritual corporation altogether apart from and above Ecclesiastical Polities, and as the witness for God and the eternal order of the moral universe, requires us to brand Schism as the arch-sin and personification of all evil. A schismatic, who is not such from ignorance but from moral antipathy to God, corresponds to, and exhausts the idea of, the scriptural word Satan. They are identical and interchangeable terms.

Christianity has supplied for the human race the historical embodiment of the absolute truth and goodness. They have been incarnated in the Christ. "The Word was made flesh, and dwelt among us (and we beheld his glory, the glory as of the only-begotten of the Father), full of grace and truth."* By this instrumental means the religious sentiment has been instructed, purified and fostered, and an

* John i. 14.

outward expression has been given of the true unity relatively to both God and man. No one therefore, at least in a Christian country, can be at a loss for the knowledge of the nature and conditions of this unity; he is not left to go in search of it guided only by the light of nature; history has interpreted and preserved it for him. The Christ answers his every inquiry: I am the Way, I am the Truth, I am the Light, I am the Life, I and my Father are One. He cannot therefore be ignorant either of what Schism is in itself, or whether he has been or is guilty of this sin. Separation from the Christ is Schism, for he is the medium of all spiritual unity, and we are to be one with him as he is one with the Father, and one with all that is true and good in the heart and life of the world.

THE CHURCH AND CIVIL PROTECTION.

The proper relation of the State to the Church is in no sense that of a patron, but merely that of a protector,—a protector, I mean, of the liberties of the *whole* Church. The limit of interference is properly drawn at the simple duty of the general community or State to give attention that the special ideas and acts of each incorporated society contain nothing contrary and inimical to the general social

conventions. Any other than this impartial and common protection must necessarily be morally unjust and injurious. Vinet has well put this view of the subject when he says, "Society, or more strictly speaking the State, which seems to have renounced the persecution of creeds, has not yet renounced their protection; and, perhaps, it will be expected, that having protested against persecution, we shall accept of protection with avidity. Yes, it is most true, that we desire that the profession of religious convictions should be protected, but protected as the common right of all, and consequently without distinction of creeds. We are not desirous that any particular creed should be protected, nor in general, believers, to the exclusion of unbelievers. We deprecate protection, for the same reason that we deprecate persecution. For the right of protection necessarily involves the right of persecution. Endeavours are made to limit this right; to prevent its exercise beyond the point where protection terminates; it may be forbidden to advance farther; but the limit is arbitrary, and it is impossible to conceive how, in sound logic, the State can be denied the right of persecution, after having been allowed that of protection. Yet the idea is of modern discovery. The times are not yet very remote, when the State, not indeed more reasonable, but certainly more logical than at present,

arrogated to itself and exercised the right for which it now contends in virtue of a distinction altogether gratuitous. If anything be needed to prove that this distinction was not then recognized, it is the fact that whenever the persecuted sects became the established religions of the country, they were not satisfied with being simply protected by the civil power, but they made use of the authority with which the State invested them, to banish or to oppress all who differed from them; to such an extent, as to induce a philosopher of the last century to say, with more asperity than irony, 'that religious liberty is only granting to every man the right of persecuting in his turn.' And how would the logic of facts contradict that of sentiment! Does not every privilege imply some exclusion? Can we put any honour upon some, which will not be more or less an affront to others? And the faith which is not protected, is it not, by that very circumstance, persecuted, at least negatively? It follows, that for any religion whatsoever to accept protection, is to accept, as a consequence, the right of persecution."*

The true idea of the Church necessarily excludes any elective interference by the general community or State for the purpose of protecting or ennobling any one section of it. If we contemplate this inter-

* Profession of Personal Religious Conviction, p. 174.

ference in its relation to individuals, the argument is overwhelming against it as a direct act of violence against the natural rights of conscience and private judgment, whose sole responsibility is to God alone. And if we view it in relation to the Church itself, whose mission is to discover and commend the truth, it cannot be otherwise than obstructive, and therefore injurious to the best interests of society.

"It is of great importance to discern whither this principle will conduct us. When the State adopts any one religion as its own, it not only rejects, and, negatively at least, persecutes the rest, but it will persecute, in the very bosom of the favoured religion, this or that diversity of sentiment, of the dangerous tendency of which it has no other evidence than the assertion of the majority. The State cannot, if it would, remain in ignorance of these diversities, however unimportant and insignificant they may be in themselves; for, in the eyes of men, these trifling differences constitute the boundary between orthodoxy and heresy; and they class among the adversaries of truth all those who are in the slightest degree impregnated with them. The State is not free to adopt, in an abstract and summary sense, the religion to which it allies itself; it adopts that religion with all its articles, their amendments and sub-

amendments. This or that formulary of impalpable signification, which has caused all who have undertaken the perilous task of its interpretation to be accounted heretics, such an incomprehensible Shibboleth becomes the religion to which the State is pledged, and it will be accused of a violation of its engagements if it do not exert its power to uphold the most unimportant and insignificant of its dogmas."* Under such circumstances, liberty, conscience, every sacred principle which is as the life-blood of the Church's vitality and health, are denied and stifled in her bosom. "Ye are called unto liberty," can only sound as a mockery to a Church thus fettered and degraded.

THE INDEPENDENCE OF THE CHURCH.

If the idea of the Church has been correctly represented as the activity of the religious sentiment in the bosom of a community, such activity can only be exercised in the enjoyment of the most complete independence. Society should unite in a common feeling of respect for this independence, not merely as an act of mutual justice, but in the sacred interests of truth, of which the Church is the sanctuary. It is from the Church that the true

* Vinet, p. 176.

social state is destined to arise, which can never be built up on the surface of mutual convenience and interests, but must have its foundations deeply laid in the common religious sentiments. This is the difference, and a very marked difference it is, between the inner society of the Church and the general society of the community. The one is the society of Conscience, the other the society of Convenience. If this distinction be borne in mind, the sphere of both societies will be clearly defined, and each will exist to the advantage of the other.

I need not pursue the suggestions of these remarks further, with the view of showing that the inner society of the Church is quite independent on the interference of the outer society as personified or represented by the State. It is sufficiently plain that such interference is a collective assumption of what every intelligent and conscientious individual of the community would himself promptly disclaim or resist. It is equally plain that the sanctity of individual freedom in the liberty of conscience must be invaded and violated by any interference of this nature. It is not merely the policy, it is above all the duty, of the State to leave religion entirely alone.* We personify the State

* Modern law of Massachusetts in relation to Religion:

"As the happiness of a people, and the good order and preservation of civil government, essentially depend upon piety, religion

in a figure of speech and for the convenience of language; but the State, strictly speaking, is not a personality, and can therefore have none of the rights which are peculiar to an individual. It is merely a collective expression of several individual wills, which have agreed to enforce certain obligations for the conveniences of social existence, and the protection, by means of a recognized force called law, of the liberties and other interests common to all the members of the society.

THE CHURCH THE SOCIETY OF CONSCIENCE AND SPIRITUAL LIFE.

But there is surely a higher idea, and even possibility, of society than that of which any particular State is the representative. We are far from the realization or even the conception of the true soci-

and morality; and as these cannot be generally diffused through a community but by the public worship of God; and as the public worship of God will be best promoted by recognizing the unalienable right of every man to render that worship in the mode most consistent with the dictates of his own conscience; therefore no person shall by law be compelled to join, or support, nor be classed with, or associated to, any congregation or religious society whatever," &c.—Law of 1820.

The above enlightened law is worthy of a Christian State, and expounds the method by which a State can best become the patron and promoter of religion in a community.

ety when the ordinary terms of the social compact have been laid down and generally observed. The laws of mutual justice and convenience, the protection of individual rights and interests which properly proceed from, and belong to, a political community, do not touch our common nature in every part of its conscious being. There is a broad area of human life which the conventions of society leave wholly unoccupied and uncultivated. This is the area of conscience and religion, which call forth and develop a still deeper social feeling in the community, the outward expression of which, in the several forms it may happen to take, is the Church. We need not ask whether this area shall be left uncultivated; the conscience of society cannot endure that human life shall be bounded by considerations of temporal convenience and interests only: the religious sentiment is too profound and general to slumber in inaction, and the Church comes forth as an impulse of our higher nature, and takes its place among the facts and powers of our social life. While conscience is an element of our moral and spiritual being, while religious feeling lives in and influences our nature, the Church is inevitable and indestructible. It must come, and it will be permanent. It did not grow out of ignorance and superstition; it is not preserved by the vitality of an inveterate and long-confirmed habit;

it is not an excrescence, a parasite, on the social life, which may be removed, not merely without injury, but with advantage to the general social condition; if the whole Church were annihilated by some strange social convulsion, it would arise again everywhere in proof of its essential vitality and universal necessity. The Church is the experiment of our deepest and most sacred nature to realize the condition of the highest ideal of the true human society.

If, then, the religious sentiment is an inherent and unquenchable feeling of our common nature, the Church which is the outward expression of this sentiment claims the respect and fostering care of every man who is a friend to himself and to his species. That it should embody itself in particular social forms, and have its special seasons, institutions and apparatus to proclaim and diffuse itself, are matters of the profoundest interest to the citizen and the State. Its essentially spiritual character and aims impart to it a unique worth, claim for it self-determination and independence, and make it indispensable to the well-being and security of any commonwealth. It has undertaken the great social problem which none other than itself can practically solve. It is the most powerful coadjutor of the State, and its wisest counsellor and most efficient aid in the embarrassments which will occasionally

clog the wheels of the social progress. But its aid must be volunteered, not purchased, spontaneous and free, not in the compact of State-partnership, and rendered without impediment or assistance from the State. It asks for no patronage, no fee, no nobility, for it acknowledges no earthly authority and dependence, and is satisfied only with the reward of its conscientious fidelity and successful work. It cannot become an engine of State power without abdicating its spiritual supremacy, resigning its spiritual functions, and attempting an unnatural and impotent alliance. It has its own sphere and its own modes of action, which the State has no power to interpenetrate, and no faculties and title to participate in. The Church, I repeat again, is the society of conscience and spiritual life, as broadly distinguished from the State, which is the society of earthly interests and material guarantees; and as such it is the sphere of spiritual aspiration, and religious feeling, and consecrated homage to the absolute Truth and Love—to the living God and His manifested Self in the historical Christ, "whom to know is life eternal."

THE UNION OF THE CHURCH AND THE STATE.

I have said that the Church is the natural outgrowth of the conscience and common religious sentiments of mankind, and that it can only be regarded as an artificial and intrusive institution—the inheritance of ancient ignorance and superstition—by such as forget that there are such spiritual elements in the soul of man as conscience and the religious sentiment. I inferred from this fact of the nature and origin of the Church, that it is an essentially independent society, and claims an exemption from every kind of interference on the part of the general community from whose bosom it has sprung, whether in the manner of patronage or control, except in so far as the patronage is exercised in the way of a common protection of the liberties of every section of it, and the control extends no farther than to see that its principles and activity do not encroach on the conventional rights of the outer circle of the general society. It would be a wrong inference from this plea for the uncontrolled liberty and independence of the Church, that it supposes an indifference in the Church to the religious condition of general society or the State; and that for the State to concede this independence would equally on its part betray a crimi-

nal indifference to the religious condition of the community of which it is at once the representative and paternal head. "Religion separates itself, only that it may re-unite itself the better, and it claims the exclusive use of its own peculiar power, only that it may apply it with energy to the moral wants of the community; acting, not, as before, through the body upon its members, but henceforth through the members upon the body."* Of course this statement of the subject implies a theory in reference to the relations of the Church and the State which is by no means the common conviction in this or most other Christian lands. It disowns any alliance between the spiritual and political power as essentially foreign to the interests and objects of either. The State represents the society of civil interests exclusively, and the Church exclusively the society of conscience and spiritual interests. There are no common terms or conditions on which these two widely distinct societies can possibly unite. The Church cannot avail itself of the patronage of the State, or acquire any rewards or nobility from it; and the State cannot propose to confer these without encroaching on the sacred precincts of conscience and violating its liberties. The Church is not, like the State, a visible corporation; if any union is attempted between the two, it can only be

* Vinet, p. 349.

with a section of the whole Church, and not with the Church itself; and consequently the much talked-of union of Church and State is a deception of language, and the fact which it expresses is as unjust and injurious, as it is false and misleading.

THE CHURCH INCORPOREAL AND INVISIBLE.

If the Church is co-extensive with the existence of the religious sentiment in its various development in conscientious opinion and activity, it is plain that it can have no corporate being, and can therefore have no means of expressing itself either in its own proper collective form, or in the way of representation. There is nothing tangible or visible about the Church as a whole; and it is of the Church as a whole that we properly speak. We call the Church a society, not because it has any visible social form and relationships, but because it is vitally one in those essential feelings and impulses which constitute the sentiment and life of religion. Amidst the great variety of speculative thought and ecclesiastical predilections which diversify and divide the Church, there is a unity of sentiment and feeling on the most vital matters of religious consciousness and life sufficiently marked to include all in one common existence and name.

All the division in the Church is in its intellectual and ecclesiastical life; there is no division in its characteristic spirit and aims. Diversity to some extent must necessarily distinguish a society like the Church: uniformity would betray a slumbering or suppressed conscience, and would therefore be inconsistent with the exercise of individual liberty. Freedom necessitates variety, and consequently uniformity cannot be the outward expression of the Church whose essential distinction it is to be "called unto liberty."

THE CHURCH AND THE SECT.

Some persons have argued for Church life in opposition to Sect life, as if there were irreconcilable variance between the two, and that the Sect should be sacrificed in the interest of the Church. The sect is one of the forms which Church life naturally takes in the exercise of individual freedom. What is the sect, but the segregation of persons united together by the bond of common opinion? If individual opinion is a necessity of rational intelligence, and in the matter of religion is made sacred by the voice of conscience, it seems to follow that a union of persons on the basis of opinion is equally necessary and equally sacred.

If individual opinion is right, what can make collective opinion wrong? The argument by which the one is condemned must also condemn the other. The impatience of sect-life, so commonly betrayed by the friends of liberal religion, either overlooks, or unreasonably undervalues, the intellectual side of religious consciousness. Religion is not merely sentiment and feeling; thought likewise interpenetrates it and contributes its quickening influence; and this disintegrates and divides it in its social development — in other words, imparts to it its denominational or sect life. To object to the sect development is equivalent to demanding uniformity, and uniformity, as we have seen, is incompatible with liberty.

The only point of view in which the existence of the sect can be regarded as antagonistic to the Church, is that in which the formative elements of the sect, namely, individual opinion and Ecclesiastical preferences, are allowed to take the precedence of those higher considerations which specially belong to the idea of the Church, and which can never be infringed upon without disturbing the most sacred relationships of Church life. But then it is not the sect that is to be condemned, but rather that exaggerated and mistaken spirit which unduly exalts the importance of opinion over the still higher claims of a common Christian sympa-

thy and affection. The sect is as much a necessity as the Church—is, in fact, one of the forms which the Church must take in the development of its intellectual or rational activity. The historical facts and phenomena of Christianity appeal to the thought and judgment of the Church, and reason is therefore quickened and opinion is invited and formed. Here is the rationale of the sect. From its earliest foundation, the highest authorities in the Church have ever recognized the sect condition of Church life. The Head of the Church himself rebuked his disciples for being offended at the independent action of a man who followed not with them. And Paul wrote, "There must needs be divisions or sects among you," and shewed that "there are diversities of operations, but the same spirit; and differences of ministries, but the same Lord." It is not to the sect manifestations of the Church that those evils of unsociable antagonism in the historical progress of the Church are so much to be attributed, as to the imprudent and unjust policy which has led general society through its organ the State to choose out one sect from the rest and give it precedence over all others, by the prestige of its influence and the weight of its power. Wherever, as in America, we see all the sectional parts of the Church equal in the sight of the law, and each is left to the support and advancement of its own intelligent and

religious forces, there we discover less of the purely sectarian animus; and what of this excessive factiousness and mutual antagonism betrays itself, the infirmity of human nature is alone responsible for. Even under the most favourable social circumstances, we cannot always insure that admirable adjustment of all the elements of religious life, so that the sect shall be duly subordinated to the more sacred affinities and obligations of the Church. There will probably always be some who will incline more to the rational than the spiritual side of Church life, and in whom the partiality for individual opinion will be stronger than the charities of the common Christian sympathy. And should this tendency to emphasize and exalt opinion acquire additional impulse in any period of Church history, —which has often happened when speculative dogma, the inheritance of tradition, has claimed for itself, on the authority of antiquity, an exclusive orthodoxy, and a revolution of opinion has set in, —it will not be by decrying the sect that we shall best serve the interests of the Church, but rather by encouraging and humanizing the conflict, while both by our voice and example we plead for the superior claims of charity and fellowship. The sect claims our respect as well as the Church of whose life it is a necessary part, and each cannot be essentially antagonistic to the other.

The rise and multiplication of sects in the Church are traceable to several independent causes. One cause is exclusively Ecclesiastical. The different ideas entertained with respect to Church government is a fruitful source of sectional separation. Some theory of government for the purposes of order and discipline is indispensable to the organization of society. A preference for clerical authority, the recognition of official grades, and the consecration of an official class, in the persons of the clergy, decide one for Episcopacy. A belief in the official equality of the clergy, the incorporation of congregations, and the union of the lay with the clerical element in maintaining the order and discipline of the Church, incline another to Presbyterianism. The adoption of the principle that each society of worshippers is independent on every other society, and is sufficient for all the purposes of its own government and discipline, leads a third to Congregationalism. While the denial of any official and specially consecrated clergy, and the recognition of the common priesthood or ministry of the whole society, irrespective of sex, determine a fourth to identify himself with the simple ecclesiastical order of the Society of Friends.

Another cause of sectional diversity is in the different conceptions of the nature and obligations of religious ordinances. The Congregationalists

are subdivided on the question of baptism; and the Society of Friends finds a farther reason for separation from all other denominations of Christians in accepting the spiritual ideas of the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper without any obligation of their ceremonial observance.

But a more radical cause of sectional distinctions exists in the Doctrinal varieties which the independent and conscientious exercise of opinion gives birth to. The natural activity of thought on the facts and principles of an historical religion like Christianity has led to the formation of many doctrinal theories, for the profession and maintenance of which societies have been formed and consolidated. These theories have embraced a wide area of speculative inquiry on the highest subjects which can engage the interest and intelligence of the religious mind. The Personality of God, the character of the Divine manifestation, the place and dignity of Christ in the scheme of revealed religion, the purposes and aims of his mission, the constitution of man, the psychology and issues of death, the nature of future rewards and punishments,—on all these subjects, and others, too numerous and abstruse to specify, the Church, in its historical course, has been divided, and sects, or, at least, congregational varieties, have been produced. And all this activity and its consequences are surely

inevitable, unless freedom be denied, and conscience stifled by some ascendant authority. Impatience of this variety in Church life has often, in times past, excited the prejudices and passions of a powerful majority, who have attempted to degrade obnoxious opinions and to embarrass the exercise of individual freedom. The union of a section of the professing Church with the State has supplied the opportunity and the means; and this is one of the strongest arguments against any such unnatural and unjust alliance, that it invests the popular majority with a power to persecute, and to place a public ban on conscientious opinions. The darkest chapters in human history are to be found in Ecclesiastical annals. No enmities have been so bitter and inveterate, and no cruelties so ingenious and sanguinary, as those indulged in and perpetrated by Ecclesiastical Churches. And these have been the legitimate fruits of the so-called union of the Church with the State. Even in our own times, when liberty of conscience is so much better understood and respected, we have seen how the bigotry of opinion has developed into hatred of the person, and how all the means which even our more enlightened civilization still affords have been used to wear out the patience of the conscientious inquirer after truth, and to pauperize and defame him. Religious liberty is even still asserted at

heavy penalties; and the claims of the personal conscience have still to be maintained at pecuniary cost, and the peril of social reputation.

It is quite natural that the true friends of religious liberty should resent this interference with the rights of conscience, and meet it with the protest of their voice and example. But a word of caution on a tendency of our times may be here offered, which is fraught with danger to the interests of truth and the real welfare of the Church. The long-endured tyranny of ascendant opinions has been felt so oppressive, and the resistance by argument has seemed so feeble and hopeless, that in sheer exhaustion and weariness the conflict has declined, and a policy of doctrinal depreciation has been so far commended as to threaten to become extreme, and to lead to a dead indifference to, and even an avowed contempt for, opinion altogether. It has been the fashion of late, in professedly unsectarian and so-called free churches, to speak contemptuously of creed, and to represent the honest assertion of conscientious beliefs as a sign of theological narrowness and bigotry, and unfriendly to the growth of spiritual sentiments and religious union. This new spirit of a pseudo-liberty is in danger of becoming a tyranny in its turn, by exacting a tacit agreement to suppress the expression of individual conviction. The Church of its ideal is

purely sentimental, emotional and practical; it asks for the enthronement of liberty, regardless of the rights of reason and conscience, which, if it means anything, can only mean a partial liberty, a liberty involving a common consent to hold private opinion in abeyance, and to lay the foundations of the Church of the Future in the negation of all thought, and the fellowship of mere sentiment and feeling. It does not seem to be seen how inconsistent is this demand with any form of visible church life and activity, and with the conditions of associated worship. Whatever may be its design, it does in effect obliterate all liturgies and prayer of every kind, and impose silence on every preacher. For associated prayer, whether liturgical or extemporized, expresses convictions and principles; and a preacher cannot divest himself of his conscience and rational understanding, and become the mere breath or flame of spiritual sentiment and feeling. There seems to be a conspicuous absence of definiteness both in the thought and aim of those who talk about the Free Church of the Future, which is to ignore everything in the nature of conviction, or, at least, to subject it to such forced constraint that it shall have no acknowledged or sensible influence in religious life. If such a Church is really looming in the future, it will certainly bear little resemblance to the Church of the earliest past, and will arise out

of the ruins of all reason and conscientiousness, which promises little for its stability and for its religious power and usefulness.

True wisdom counsels a mutual toleration and respect in reference to liberty of conscience and the profession of personal religious convictions. If we condemn the persecution of opinion as unjust and cruelly oppressive, and injurious to the discovery and spread of truth, we cannot do otherwise than condemn the opposite extreme to which many, in our own times, are carried, who are practically degrading and suppressing the expression of religious opinion in their one-sided and vague demands for a sentimental union. These opposite policies of action are both alike antagonistic to the rights of conscience and the diffusion of truth. The supercilious contempt of Creed exhibited by many, who consider themselves farther advanced on the high road of a true religious freedom and life than the rest of their fellows, betrays a strange disregard of the mental and moral constitution of man. Creed is the legitimate offspring of intelligence and conscience, and must hold its place in a religion which engages both the understanding and the heart. It is sacred for its birth's sake. The task is an impossible and wrongful one which endeavours by indifference and contemptuousness to lower the reputation of conscientious belief. Whether right or

wrong, it is sacred to the individual, and claims respect. A wiser and more dutiful course is to encourage the expression of honest belief, that it may come to the light of evidence and proof, and be confirmed or corrected. Because belief is mere opinion, and peculiar to the individual or to a section of the Church, and not to the universal Church; because it is more immediately concerned with the theory than with the essential spirit and life of religion, has it no voice to the whole Church, and no influence whatever in moulding the spirit and directing the life? A soul is morally and religiously better or worse for its opinions. Opinion is power as well in religious as in social and political life. Is not all science the creation of opinion? Is not political government the product of opinion? Is not civilization the fruit of opinion? It is a strange inconsistency that while in the larger republic of general society opinion is held of so serious account, and regarded as a mighty power for good or evil,—in the more private republic of the Church a disposition should be shown to treat it with indifference, and virtually deny it any personal obligation and practical value. When the Church ceases to have opinions, it ceases to be intelligent and reflective, and when it discourages their expression and defence, it virtually sacrifices its conscientiousness. And a Church in which

reason and conscience are not the recognized and active elements of its life, is the victim of superstition and tyranny, and must be an encumbrance and a curse, and not a minister and blessing to society.

THE CHURCH THE TRUE SOCIETY.

So far as we have proceeded in the attempt to develop the idea of the Church, we have seen that it has its origin in the conscience and religious sentiments of the community, and that therefore it is in its most essential conception the aggregate expression of all moral and spiritual activity in the direction of truth, purity, goodness, and every virtue. The fact that this moral and spiritual activity is not spontaneously quickened and developed, but is educated or called out by influences and agencies begotten by an historical type of the true life created by divine power and invested with divine authority, marks the Church as a real incorporation, held together by the forces of central facts and truths, and organized with a perfect social constitution. It is an actual society pledged to definite principles and governed by clearly revealed and inviolable laws. According to a favourite apostolic analogy, it is a complete organism of head and

members, acknowledging a supreme authority and mutual ties and obligations. It comprises within itself all the conditions of social existence, resembling at once both the family or household and the State, in the tender charities and endearments of the one, and the common conveniences, interests and well-being of the other. It is society in its most catholic, intimate and perfect expression.

The Church, in fact, claims to give birth to, and to be in itself, the True Society. For this purpose it carries in its bosom all the sentiments, impulses and formative elements of a perfect social life. No home has wider and purer benevolences and more tender and self-sacrificing charities,—no society has more respect for personal rights and regard for private interests, than has that ideal Church of which the Christ of history is the founder and inspiration. If, in the progress of Church history, the accidents and subsidiary circumstances of Church life have stood forth on the surface of society with undue prominence, and secured an excessive share of public attention and interest,—if the salient features of the Church have been more especially those which belong to the variety of ecclesiastical predilections and doctrinal peculiarities, so that the Church has presented the appearance of disjointed and conflicting corporations animated by divergent and antagonistic beliefs, and opposing to each other

rival claims and interests,—these things are the exaggerations of what is merely incidental in the social development of the Church, and, so far, have been unfortunate for its reputation and influence. The Church is an experiment, and the purest aims and endeavours of mankind are necessarily prosecuted amidst much imperfection, so that it is reasonable to expect that even the course of the Church should not have been uniformly true to its ideal, and that many disfigurements and partial failure should have been inseparable from it. It can scarcely be questioned that one of the most fruitful causes of the perversion of the Church from its true spirit and aims has been the patronage extended by the State to one section of it, and the unnatural alliance which has thus been formed. The very name of the Church has thus been exclusively appropriated by this elected section, and every other branch of the universal Church has been placed under an invidious ban of social inferiority,—unrecognized and unhonoured. The "Church" has by this State alliance become a political power, which it has always swayed in the political interests of the party which may have happened to possess the ascendancy in the State. It is only natural that other Churches should have been placed in a position of antagonism by this misjudged partiality, and should have developed a counteracting political

tendency and aims. The State has initiated and fostered this political element and antagonism in the Churches, and now as a natural consequence Church relationships indicate more or less political principles and sympathies. This is a wide departure from the ideal Church of Christ. It could only have come to pass in the forgetfulness of those lessons which the Head of the Church so explicitly taught on the wide distinction between politics and religion, and the perfect separation of his Church from all those passions and interests which necessarily enter into political schemes and considerations. "My kingdom is not of this world," either in its principles, aims or means; the things of Cæsar are to be rendered to Cæsar, and the things of God to God. It is not that politics and religion are necessarily opposed to each other, that a Christian may not be a politician, and a politician a Christian, but that they are broadly distinguished spheres of individual sympathy and action, and in the interests of each are wisely kept distinct. Both spheres engage the sympathies of the Christian citizen, but not in the same kind and degree. He "carries not into the political region all the profundity of his being. He can—nay, he must, as a member of the community—keep many things in the back ground; and although he may be a citizen with his whole heart, although he may be sensible

of a species of communion with those who love the same country as himself, still his whole heart, his whole soul, are not expended in this relation."* He is capable of other sympathies, and is conscious of other wants and interests as a member of society; and however numerous these may be, each does not necessarily intrude into the other, but he carries so much of his earnest self into his several social relations as are sufficient for their respective objects and advantage. His Church relation is thus one among many social relations in which he stands to his fellow-men, but this is the strongest and most intimate of which he is conscious, and therefore it engages his profoundest feelings, his purest sentiments and most consecrated energies. In this distribution of his sympathies and active efforts he is sensible of no inconsistency and conflict; his nature is capable of this variety, and his social circumstances involve and require it.

If this were the actual state of things on a much larger scale than commonly occurs—if every man's conduct corresponded with his profession and his consciousness of personal duty, and his practical sympathies were distributed according to their due measure and intensity among the several objects of social obligation and interest—the influence of the Church would then be seen and felt beyond

* Vinet: Profession of Personal Religious Conviction, p. 360.

any former experience in its historical progress. Society would be so profoundly affected by the sensible evidences of Christian activity and enterprize in the improved tone of its intercourse and the better conduct of its life, that it would cease to concern itself with what is merely accidental and superficial in connection with Church development, and would do voluntary homage to the presence and power of the pure religious sentiment, and readily accept it as the sovereign remedy for every social ill, and the true element of its moral culture and reformation. Declaring its divine origin in the character and success of its work, the Church would be owned as the wisdom and power of God, the secret of social well-being, and the pioneer and assurance of the true civilization.

THE CHURCH A MINISTRY.

The aims and functions of the Church, if we consider them according to the idea presented by the Founder of the Church and the first teachers of Christianity, are entirely moral and spiritual in their nature, and no society has any guarantee of progress and permanence in which the Church is not an active and powerful influence. In its truest and profoundest idea, the Church is a Ministry—

an active moral and spiritual propagandism. All its members, without distinction of sex, are clergy, the Lord's lot or inheritance, and pledged by their Christian profession to the performance of clerical functions. The priesthood ought to be considered as co-extensive with the Church. "Ye are a royal priesthood," was spoken by an apostolic writer, not of any part, but of the whole Church. It is of the utmost importance to the practical efficiency of the Church that this idea should be owned and maintained. The circumstances and needs of society have called for a professional ministry for the purposes of instruction and exhortation, and the general order and convenience of associated or public worship; and a sentiment has been created and fostered in Christian society too exclusively professional in reference to the Christian ministry. The recognition of a ministerial order is, no doubt, wise and useful, but this recognition ought not to lose sight of the essentially ministerial character of every member of the Christian profession. No professional ministry, whatever its gifts, acquirements and religious earnestness, can monopolize the functions of the general ministry of the entire Church; for the ministry, in its profoundest conception, is the Ministry of the Spirit,—the diffusion of pure moral truth and sentiments, and the active propagandism of virtuous impulses and feelings. A ministry of

this purely spiritual and moral nature is less efficiently discharged in a pulpit than accomplished by the intercourses of practical conduct. A spiritual ministry must be acted rather than taught, and its truest and most potent eloquence will always be better heard and felt in the voices and quickening power of a virtuous and beneficent life. It is in the homes, and amidst the commerce and friendships and various social relations of mankind, that the ministry of truth and love is demanded, and where it may be most effectually fulfilled. The professional ministry is dependent on a variety of expensive and formal conditions,—on funds, architecture, special seasons, and conventional ceremonies. It addresses itself to society on stated occasions, when it has withdrawn itself for the time being from the engrossing and active pursuits of life,—when its interests and passions are in a state of comparative rest, and it cannot be summoned to immediate action. These, valuable as they are, are not the most favourable conditions of ministerial action and influence. It is well that society should recognize such a ministry, own such seasons, and maintain such conventional usages. Truth needs to speak, conscience needs appeals, and the heart needs persuasion. The voice of the professional ministry could not be safely silenced; and society would not profitably forsake its sacred assemblies,

and abandon its opportunities of social worship and instruction. The two ministries may advantageously work side by side; but that ministry which can alone fulfil the idea of the Church, and effectually accomplish its aims, as a Ministry of the Spirit, to permeate and quicken society with pure sentiments and virtuous and beneficent principles of intercourse and conduct, is the ministry of the whole Church, every member of which is himself animated with these sentiments, and an example of this generous and virtuous conduct. The true Christian ministry is the preaching of the life; and society is most effectually stimulated to worship God when it is made sensible of His presence by His pure and beneficent image in the spirit and character of men.

It is this function of the Church, this power of diffusing itself like leaven throughout all society, that gives it its value and influence as the greatest agent of moral civilization. By its universal and unobtrusive ministry it goes abroad everywhere, under all circumstances, upon all occasions, and at all times, silently exerting its quickening and moulding influence, like the secret forces of nature, of whose presence and energy we are scarcely aware till their effects surprise us in the lovely forms and hues and delicious fragrance of the cheering spring and the luxuriant, gorgeous summer. If this min-

istry were accepted and fulfilled by all the members of the professing Church in the consciousness of the strictness and solemnity of their sacred ordination,—if every one went forth into all the relations and pursuits of life in the spirit of Christ, speaking and acting his truth and love,—what flowers of moral beauty and fragrance would burst forth on the expanded bosom of society, and what rich and refreshing fruits of goodness and every virtue would regale the taste and rejoice the hearts of all men! The full force of this ministry, if in operation, would change the whole condition and aspect of society. The true civilization waits on its generous service. No merely ecclesiastical or legislative action can supply its place in this great work of moral regeneration. Ecclesiastical machinery is too professional, artificial and formal, and the State has no means of reaching the conscience and heart of the community. It is "the Ministration of the Spirit" which society asks for, and this is the exclusive service of the Church through its individual members, whose personal character of virtuous principle, self-denial and beneficent activity, liberates this renewing spirit and diffuses its sacred influence around.

CHURCH-SPIRIT AND CHURCH-WORK.

There is one ruling principle or passion in the Church which is the inspiration of its life and activity, by which all its energies are guided, and to which whatever measure of success it may have in its influence on society is chiefly due. This principle or sentiment is Love. This being its characteristic spirit and the supreme source of its power, the Church in its most vital and essential nature is a moral or spiritual influence, and the sphere of its operation is beneath the surface of the social life—in the bosom of that under-current of secret feeling which imparts to character and conduct their particular quality and form. The Church is thus in its highest and most characteristic idea a widely diffused and invisible power, and cannot be incorporated in any ecclesiastical form or organization. It is only in an inferior and limited sense that the term Church can be applied to a congregation of worshippers, or an assemblage of congregations of the same doctrinal opinions and ecclesiastical government and order. The Church is much wider than, and altogether above and beyond, these embodied forms of ecclesiastical existence. As a spiritual body it exists under the same invisible conditions as its living and only acknowledged

Head. The Christ is a spiritual presence and power, and so is his Church. The Christ as the Image of God is Love, and such is the Church, which is, in its turn, the image or reflection of the Christ. The evidence of Church life and influence is the presence and power of love in the spirit and conduct of society, and the measure of its success is to be sought in the degree in which the general community is permeated by this tender and considerate sentiment in all its social relations. We recognize true Church work in the improving spirit of social intercourse, when courtesy is dictated by generous feeling, and refinement of manners has its plastic force in the tender humanity of the heart, and words are the breath of kindness, and actions are governed by a respect for personal rights, and prompted by wisdom and goodness. If these signs are wanting in a community, the Church proclaims its weakness and inefficiency, and it is of small concern in the real interests of society that ecclesiastical activity everywhere obtrudes itself in the multiplication of churches, the elaboration of rituals, the gathering of solemn assemblies, the observance of ceremonies and ordinances—all these things are but artificial, æsthetical, sentimental, and may coexist with a dormant conscience and a dead heart, —a social character inveterately selfish, and a life inflated with pride and vanity. Religion is not in

the ascendant when ecclesiastical machinery is most obtrusive. It is not the best sign, or even a sign at all, of spiritual health and life, when the religious sentiment consolidates itself in technical forms, devises specialties, and affects artificial moods and usages. It is no essential or even natural part of religion that people should withdraw themselves from their place in society, clothe themselves in unsightly and gloomy costumes, and parade their ecclesiastical tastes and devotion on the public highways. Sin does not necessarily inhere in silk, nor sanctity in serge; and if genuine piety be the reason of this self-immolation and seclusion, society is a loser by its voluntary withdrawal, and would be better served by its presence and influence in its midst. Nature is only made grotesque when a fanciful art interferes to divert its own proper development and expression; and religion, which is nature in its purest, holiest and most perfect mood, is distorted and turned aside from its true direction by the artificial inventions of a capricious ingenuity, and the imposition of technical forms and usages. Let us conceive of the Church apart from the adventitious circumstances of its ecclesiastical tastes and peculiarities, and contribute our influence and endeavour to realize its true ideal. Let us accustom ourselves to think of it as the divine ideal of the true society, and

as enfolding in itself all the elements of the true civilization. Let us identify it with all that is reverent, pure and virtuous in human character and conduct, and measure its success by the diffusion of these qualities in the bosom of our social life. Let us recognize, above all, its characteristic spirit of mutual charity or love, which is the basis of all that is true and good in human life, which is the feature in which human character most nearly resembles God, which made the Christ the Image of the universal Father, and gave him his exaltation and supremacy among the sons of men.* Love is the law of all life, human and divine. It is the comprehension of all piety towards God and man. It is "the bond of perfectness," and on it "hang all the law and the prophets." "Love is of God, and every one that loveth is born of God, and knoweth God. He that loveth not, knoweth not God; for God is love."

* "La difference de nos doctrines ne saurait faire de nous des adversaires. Au-dessus des Eglises de confession de foi, il y a l'Eglise *de sentiment;* c'est en elle que nous nous réunissons et que nous sommes freres." Et Galates v. 6, vi. 15.—Nicolas: Essais de Philosophie et d'Histoire Religieuse, p. 222.

THE CHURCH, PAST, PRESENT AND FUTURE.

"The House of God, which is the Church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."* We must not contemplate this apostolic presentation of the Church through the microscopic lens of ecclesiastical Christianity. We must come with broad views and the most catholic sympathies, would we correctly interpret these apostolic words. "The House of God" is not the straitened dwelling-place of a sect, whether nationally established or created by voluntary independence, but the designation of the entire family of God of every name, kindred and tongue, over which God presides as the Paternal Head, who "is no respecter of persons; but in every nation he that feareth Him and worketh righteousness is accepted with Him." "The Church of the living God" takes into its comprehensive embrace the faithful and virtuous wherever found; for fidelity and virtue are the substance of all religion, natural and revealed, and comprise all that is possible and conceivable in the nature of piety.† Such is the ecclesiastical doctrine of the New Testament. With this scriptural idea of the House or Church of God, we are conscious of no embarrassment in reference to the meaning of

* 1 Tim. iii. 15. † Rom. ii. 13—15.

the word "Truth." We ask neither in doubting nor desponding mood, "What is Truth?" We see at a glance that Truth, in the language of Paul just quoted, must mean instinctive, practical, moral Truth,—the truth of the common conscience and heart of humanity—the most complete expression of which is seen in the teaching, spirit and life of Jesus Christ, who is called emphatically "the Truth." It cannot be constructive, scientific, speculative truth, which is always relative, partial and special, varying with the strength, capacity and culture of individual understandings, and obnoxious to question and doubt. It is the uniform and universal truth which never provokes scepticism, because it appeals to the facts and principles of the universal human consciousness, to the natural moral instincts—not to that which the mind troweth in its intellectual excursions into the vast field of human observation and conjecture. Jesus Christ as "the Truth" spoke words of "spirit and life," which are at once the essence and substance of religious truth. The truth of "spirit and life" may therefore find "a pillar and ground" in a spiritual and living Church. We see at once compatibility between the foundation and the superstructure. Here is no incongruity. Every member of the Divine Household discloses the same sign, speaks the same thing, contributes to the same

beautiful and universal result. We cannot, at least as yet, gather the Household of God into a speculative and scientific unity. As yet, "we know only in part, and prophesy in part." A speculative and scientific House or Church, in the present conflicting state of our knowledge of divine things, would be a "pillar" without mortar and cohesion, a "ground" of sand without consolidation and stability. The House or Church of the living God is a spiritual and moral unity, like the Truth which it elevates on its "pillar and ground," for the admiration and confidence of the world.

What grandeur and worth does the Church of the living God assume, as seen from the Christian or New-Testament point of view! It is a House or Family bound together by the immortal ties of love, fidelity and virtue. All the true and the good are members of this great Catholic Household, despite of the accidents of faiths and nationalities.* It opens wide its hospitable doors to people of every nation, kindred and tongue, who ask for truth and live according to the light which Providence has kindled for them, and deny to none the charities of a common brotherhood. The Christ, as the

* "La variété des croyances dogmatiques est moins un empêchement qu'une condition de la veritable unité Chrétienne, qui reside dans des regions spirituelles bien élevées au-dessus des etroites oppositions des théologies scolastiques."—Nicolas: Essais de Philosophie et d'Histoire Religieuse, p. 223.

culminating man—the man who has ascended to the loftiest heights of moral and spiritual attainment—he is the elder brother in this virtuous and loving Household—is the delegated legislative Head of this Church of the true and pure. He belongs to no other House, presides over no other Church. Other sheep he has which are not of one particular fold,* either sectional or national; them also he must bring into the broad enclosure of his one flock,* that they all may be one. And "the Church of the first-born," whose "names are written in heaven," and who as yet slumber in the peacefulness of their mortal rest, come within the pale of this Divine Church,—have their place in the family circle of this heavenly and catholic Household. "The gates of the grave† shall not prevail against my Church," said He who is the Resurrection and

* *αὐλῆς, ποίμνη*, John x. 16. The word "fold" in the concluding clause of this verse incorrectly represents the original. The text should be rendered thus: "And other sheep I have, which are not of this *fold:* them also I must bring, and they shall hear my voice: and there shall be one *flock*, and one shepherd" [*ποιμην*], or keeper of the whole flock of many folds.

† *πύλαι ᾅδου* (Matt. xvi. 18), the gates of *the unseen state* or *grave*, not the gates of *hell*, as in the Common Version. The meaning seems to be rather, that they who have died and descended to the grave are as really a part of the Church as they who are still living,—that death cannot destroy any portion of Christ's universal Church, because he, as the Resurrection and the Life, will recover the dead and confer on them the reward of immortality.

the Life, and who holds the keys of death and the grave. What a halo of glory encircles this Church of all time—past, present and future! And when the day dawns on which the formal adoption and visible manifestation of the sons of God shall occur, what Hallelujahs to God and the Lamb will echo throughout the mighty vault of the universe in the enthusiastic consciousness of the perfected redemption! Then, for the first time in its long historic progress, will the Church of the living God be visible, gathered together under its visible living Head, the once only-begotten Son of God, but now the first-born of many begotten sons and daughters of the Lord Almighty. Have we not faith in such a glorious future? Is it not the Christian hope? Does not "the whole creation," as Paul says, "groan and travail in pain .... waiting for the adoption,—the redemption of our body," or personal being, in the great deliverance "from the bondage of corruption into the glorious liberty of the children of God"? Even so. "The earnest expectation of the creature waiteth for the manifestation of the sons of God."

THE CHURCH A HOUSE OF "MANY MANSIONS."

This is our highest idea of the House or Church of the living God, which for the interests of "the truth," and the sociality of the Christian brotherhood, ought always to be distinctly recognized and upheld as of first and most binding consideration. This is the broad and only possible basis of union and fraternity among all the sons and daughters of God, cementing together in one common family all the generations of the faithful and virtuous of the past, present and future. In the historic progress of this Church, however, there must be manifold developments necessitated by social exigencies, and varying under the influences of civilization,—its diversified wants, tastes and intellectual activity. The House of God has scope for all the variety which the thought, inclination, conscience and convenience of the holy household may create. "In my Father's House are many mansions," said our Lord, each having its own distinctive features, while a common resemblance unites them together in the most perfect domestic oneness. There is thus an analogy between the moral and material world—unity with diversity being the universal condition of all activity and being. No fact is more obvious in the material creation of God than this thread of

unity running through and holding together the infinite variety of form. How strange that highly civilized communities, with their busy, far-reaching thought and ever-extending science, should have been deaf to the suggestions of this fact, and sought by artificial and coercive measures to restrain the same normal development in the spiritual and religious sphere! It is surely our highest wisdom and most filial piety to rejoice, as well as concur in, the distribution of our Father's House into its "many mansions," and to strive to make our particular "mansion" as much a miniature of the whole household, in its catholic sympathies and toleration, as our loving industry and charitable zeal can contribute to render it. Let us, then, descend to this practical and necessary consideration of Church life. As members of the great comprehensive household of God, we are all distributed into our special "mansions" by the tendencies of our honest thought, the obligations of our convictions, and the bias of our sympathies and aims. Let us, without forgetfulness of the bonds which hold us to those of other "mansions," come within the narrower circle of our own more special spiritual relations, and, so long as we acknowledge these relations, endeavour to intensify them, make them attractive and influential on those that are without, and so build up and adorn our "mansion"

that it shall not be the least worthy to take its place in the general household. I say, let us "descend" to this consideration, not because it is an actual going down to what is inferior and less worthy of us, but because it is a coming down from what is general to what is particular, and therefore to what lies nearer to us, and is always our more immediate concern and duty. In this more contracted and special sphere, we shall hear a voice, in the words of the apostle, which conscience and the obligations of Christian duty, to say nothing of our personal religious interests, unite to commend to us.

THE "CHURCHES" AND THE PROBLEM OF TRUTH.

While we acknowledge the necessity of diversity in the ecclesiastical development of the historic Church in every succeeding generation, and, in our respect for the rights of private judgment and individual freedom, would do nothing to restrain the legitimate tendency to this diversity, we do not overlook the fact, that there is a wisdom and truth towards which all the separate lines of special thought and sympathy should strive to turn, and in which they ought to endeavour to converge as in a common centre. We recognize diversity in

religious thought and action not as we accept diversity in the material world, which is its normal and permanent condition,—the tributary touches of its aggregate beauty and the grand diapason of its harmony. Diversity in moral and spiritual activity is a contingency arising out of the imperfection and experiment of the human mind, which has to work out the great problem of truth for itself with such aptitudes, conveniences and aids as it may possess;—which will therefore take its own direction subject to the controlling influences of association and expanding knowledge and experience. Diversity here is the inevitable consequence of free action, and is the temporary and ever-varying experiment of individual minds. With the diffusion of knowledge and the maintenance of personal freedom, we look not for the increase, but the diminution, of this diversity, unless we are prepared to admit that there is no such thing as absolute final truth, and that the progress of enlightenment carries us farther away from, rather than leads us forward to, the truth. Our knowledge of the constitution of the human mind, and the conditions of freedom, bid us accept and respect religious diversity; but this, so far from encouraging a passive acquiescence in, ought to stimulate the energies of the wisest and best minds among us to reduce this diversity to its narrowest dimensions, by digging out the

secrets of truth for society, and commending them as precious gems for its admiration and acceptance. Every explorer of truth is practically doing this, in so far as he makes known his findings to the world, and is thus multiplying the ties of unity, which can never be too numerous, between the understandings, no less than between the consciences and hearts, of mankind. No one, I presume, will deny that, in the sphere of Christian life, there is much even still to be done in the way of discovering and commending the truth to each other;—that as yet the diversity that exists among Christians descends too deeply into the very bosom of essential truth to be good for the religious health and brotherhood of the Church, and therefore seriously obstructive of the testimony which the House or Church of God is called upon to bear as "the pillar and ground of the truth." As yet Christians differ among themselves in reference to rudimental principles—to what is essential and non-essential. We are not, even in the last half of the nineteenth century, able to take up the language of a primitive writer and say with him, "Leaving the *principles* of the doctrine of Christ, let us go on unto perfection." We have still to settle the rudiments of our common religion in the general intelligence and faith of the Christianhood. No doubt there will always be scope, a sort of outlying margin, where

diversity will prevail in the thought and conviction of the Church, and this is far from being undesirable; but so long as the Church disagrees about essentials, there is abundant work for wise, and philanthropic, and pious heads and hearts to do, than which no work is more imperative and urgent, and which promises a larger harvest of goodwill and happiness for the world. So long as this state of things continues, the several ecclesiastical "mansions," or denominations, into which the Christian Church is divided, have heavy responsibilities towards each other and society at large;—they have to find out and acknowledge the true foundation, and do their utmost to build up "the gold, silver and precious stones" thereon, that the House or Church of the living God may be visible and attractive in our generation, and society may be gathered within it, instead of being repelled from it by its essential diversities and mutual estrangements and discord.

THE "CHURCHES" AND THEIR SPECIAL TRUTH.

Where among the ecclesiastical corporations into which Christian society is divided, shall we find the nearest approach to the New-Testament conception of the House or Church of God, and in

which the sincerest love of truth is combined with most respect for all honest convictions, and the most strenuous and consistent assertion of individual liberty? Such a corporation is the one towards which all enlightened, free and philanthropic minds will naturally tend. Unless our ecclesiastical sympathies and relations are the result of mere accident, in the production of which intelligent and conscientious thought has had no influence, we shall naturally consider that our own religious fellowship demonstrates most of these marks of a thoroughly Christian society. It is not in the impertinence of a conceited complacency, but in the intelligence of modest conviction, that we think our own ecclesiastical society, be that what it may, the best exponent of Christian truth. Then surely this faith of ours points to a manifest duty—the duty of coming forward, in the activity of our Church action, to commend our special convictions and principles to the common understanding and faith of society. This practical obligation is too self-evident to need any elaborate attempts to prove it. That person places himself quite beyond argument, who, seriously professing and cherishing his religious faith, at social disadvantages moreover and penalties, denies the obligation of its diffusion. If it be worth adopting and professing at all, especially at the cost of what no man can be indifferent

to, it must be worth communicating. Charity, the merest philanthropy, bids its communication. Indeed, it may be questioned whether a person has any serious religious faith who cares nothing about its fortunes in the world. The spirit of religion is essentially a spirit of communication and diffusion. "Freely ye have received, freely give," is one of its most characteristic and binding precepts. Besides, the socializing influences of religion, and its tendency to incorporate itself in the visible expression of "Church" organization, imply relations and duties to the outlying society from the bosom of which it has sprung. In proportion to the purity and intensity of the fellowship within the Church, is the earnestness of its beneficent sympathy towards all without its own favoured circle. Its charity will necessitate a proselyting and adapting activity. This has always been the manifestation of the religious life of Christianity. This is what its Founder designed when he gave birth to the spiritual Society or Church of which he is the ever-living Head, and the eternal fountain of its inspiration. This is the natural way in which the Church demonstrates itself, and by which it fulfils its function as "the pillar and ground of the truth."

THE "CHURCHES" AND THEIR AGE.

None, I presume, will dispute this. The question then arises, how we may best commend our special truth to the acceptance of society. And the answer to this will depend on the character and circumstances of our particular civilization. The Church, to be an efficient agent for the diffusion of religion, must adapt itself to the circumstances, wants and tastes of the times. "The children of light" must emulate the wisdom of "the children of this generation" in the skill and enterprize, the energy and self-denial, with which they pursue their several vocations. I cannot imagine that, in this or any succeeding age, religion will be ever able to dispense with the material aids which its organization and ordinances afford for the culture and diffusion of spiritual life. So long as we wear a material nature, and have sensible wants and affinities, religion will crystallize itself in visible corporations and more or less ceremonial usages; it will continue to ask for the conveniences and adornments of architecture, for forms of worship, for sacred days and customs, and for whatever institutions minister to its development and perfection. It will incarnate itself in a worship and a "Church." It will cling to its history, emphasize its facts, bring forth its creden-

tials, establish its testimonies, define and commend its beliefs. It will be a historical and positive religion. It will never detach itself from the historical and sensible—from fact and form—and preserve its life in the abstraction of mere sentiment, aspiration and spiritual feeling. If religion ever come to this, it will be powerless on the conscience and life of men; it will soon become attenuated; sicken and die. It will find no vigorous and permanent nourishment in the transcendental region into which it has evaporated; and, transporting itself beyond the ordinary and familiar, the visible and material sphere of human life, it will virtually cease to be an influence in human affairs. "The truth" of religion asks for "a pillar and ground"—a substantial and visible basis—on which it may be elevated for the observation and faith of the world. It is not satisfied nor honoured when its "pillar and ground" are thrust into obscure corners, or crowded out of the public cognizance by indifference, or false and narrow notions of economy, or antiquarian, traditional and personal sympathies. It is not served by the mistaken conservatism which clings to past forms and usages which have lost their elasticity and become rigid by the stiffening and benumbing effects of a long-protracted and cold monotony; which repel by their vapidness, and obstructively refuse to become the broad and suitable channel

for a richer, more expansive and earnest worship. It demands to be seen—to stand high up, and boldly out, in the fair and attractive proportions which a progressive civilization asks for—that society may have an opportunity of knowing and judging of it, and, if it have the wisdom and grace, may bow down before and do it homage. The Truth asks for this, and every true and faithful Church will *be* this for the Truth. It will constitute itself a comely and conspicuous "pillar"—a well-cleared and capacious "ground"—according to its means and opportunities, and the chastened tastes and reasonable requirements of the age; and thus will it declare itself, and fulfil its divine commission as a part of the great Christian family—the House of God, which is the Church of the living God, the "pillar and ground of the truth."

But higher than all considerations of organization, apparatus and corporate demonstrativeness, which are but politic means to a high spiritual end, is the paramount obligation of fostering and diffusing the pure religious sentiments of Christianity. Society in every age stands in need of Christian aspirations to elevate and direct its advancing civilization. To kindle and sustain these aspirations is the function of the Church—the special duty of every Christian life in its particular social sphere. The true Christian life is one of earnest,

all-absorbing moral endeavour to conform in all its inward consciousness and outward conduct with the spirit and life of the Christ, to quicken in the common human life pure and generous impulses, and to commend to the general faith and practice the principles of truth, virtue and all-embracing charity or love. Aspirations so pure and transcendent, a duty so exalted and so sacredly acknowledged, a mission so sublime and so solemnly avowed and accepted, exalt the Church to the highest place of dignity and honour in the moral life of the world, and enhance its incalculable worth as the divinely-ordained agency of human regeneration. The Church is the gathering up and preservation for the world in living forms and images of all the most hallowed memories and influences of the past, the reproduction and diffusion for every succeeding generation of the spirit and moral power of its divine Founder,—the world's anointed Redeemer, the perpetuation in its own diversified and widely diffused life of his ever-living presence, in fulfilment of his promise, "Lo, I am with you always, even unto the end of the world."

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